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ABSTRACT

The demand for competent translators is at an all-time high. Translators work with written language, and generally work either in-house for a business, translation agency, or other institution, or as free-lancers. Leading employers of translators in the United States are the federal government, domestic and multinational corporations and subsidiaries, importers and exporters, commercial and non-profit research institutions, manufacturers, engineering and construction firms, publishing industry, patent attorneys, news media, international organizations, and foreign, diplomatic, commercial, and scientific represtnatives in the U.S. translators must be capable of expressing in the target language ideas formulated by someone else in the source language, requiring knowledge of subject-specific terminology, awareness of style and grammar, regional language, and nuances and idiomatic expressions. Translation courses are increasingly available in colleges and universities. Qualifications recommended for translators in the current market include subject-matter specialization, high target language proficiency, highly-developed writing skills, broad and varied language training, and periodic professional continuing education. Need for translation exists most commonly in advertising, commercial information-gathering, business communication, scientific and professional journals, and scholarly writing. (MSE)

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The Translation Profession

Deanna Lindberg Hammond

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

April 1992

The Translation Profession

(EDO-FL-91-07)

Deanna Lindberg Hammond
Congressional Research Service, President of the American Translators Association

This ERIC Digest is based on an article published in the September 1990 issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Volume 511*, titled, "The Translation Profession in the United States Today." For more information, write to *The Annals*, 3937 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

The translation profession has been in existence for a long time. Translators have enabled the works of great writers to be read by many people of different cultures and linguistic backgrounds. In school, students learn about scientific discoveries, great voyages, and different philosophies, thanks in part to the work of translators. Translation has long played a role in the dissemination of scientific information. With increased contact between nations in the past few decades and with increased communications through satellites and other products of modern technology, it has become easier and faster to learn about what is happening in the rest of the world. The exchange of ideas and printed matter between different linguistic communities has necessitated an unprecedented amount of translation. In the last decade, the need for translation has continued to rise, reflecting the needs of businesses, the scientific community, and other areas. Today, the majority of individuals working in the translation field deal more with technical and semi-technical works than with literary ones.

What Is the Difference Between a Translator and an Interpreter?

Translation involves the skill of working with written language, whereas interpretation involves working with spoken communication. A translator renders written materials in one language into written form in another language. "Interpreters attempt to transpose statements given orally by speakers representing one culture into the spoken form that is characteristic of the culture of those listening to the interpretation" (Weber, 1990).

Where Can Translators Find Employment?

Translators generally work either in-house for a business, translation agency, or other institution, or as freelancers. Most are freelancers who either find their own clients or translate for firms or translation bureaus, and who are paid depending on the length and difficulty of a translation. Fees may also reflect supply and demand of a particular language or subject.

Salaried translators are part of the in-house staff of an agency, firm, or institution. For the vast majority of this type of translator, expertise in a specific subject matter, such as chemistry or economics, is necessary. In-house translators may be called on to do foreign language research and other language-related duties because they are readily available. They may need to be able to translate from several languages. Translator positions in the United States Government, for example, require the ability to translate from at least two languages, and World Bank translators must be able to translate from three. The number of full-time positions is limited.

The leading employers of translators in the United States are the U.S. Government; U.S. and multinational corporations and their subsidiaries; importers and exporters; commercial and non-profit research institutions; manufacturers; engineering and construction firms with foreign connections; the publishing industry; patent attorneys; the news media; the United Nations and other international organizations; and foreign, diplomatic, commercial, and scientific representatives in the United States (American Translators Association, 1987).

What Are the Qualifications of a Competent Translator?

Translators must be capable of expressing, in the target language, ideas that someone else has formulated in the source language. They need to understand the language from which they are translating and be able to write well in the language into which they are translating. This requires understanding subject-specific terminology and having an awareness of style and grammar, regional language, and nuances and idiomatic expressions. Translators must understand the technical area in which they are working and are often expected to possess an in-depth knowledge of highly specialized subjects. Subject matter is becoming so important that the European Economic Community has recently changed its language-specific translation divisions into subject matter ones. Translators are required to stay up-to-date with respect to terminology and must be able to look at a text for meaning and not necessarily translate it literally. For learning technical vocabulary, translators should frequently consult subject-specific articles, have access to new glossaries, and have contacts in a given field. Freelance translators also need access to word processing equipment, a fax machine, and a modem.

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What Kind of Training Is Beneficial to Prospective Translators?

In response to a multitude of needs in today's world, foreign language enrollments have been increasing in high schools, colleges, and universities. Translation courses are part of the curriculum at a number of universities, whether as separate classes or part of certificate or degree programs. Some institutions, such as Georgetown University (Washington, DC) and the Monterey (CA) Institute of Foreign Studies, offer translator-interpreter training programs.

College graduates with degrees in foreign languages who are interested in entering the translation field often do not possess translation skills because the emphasis on language instruction in the classroom tends to be on oral proficiency. The ability to speak a language is not necessarily an indication of written language ability. In translation, reading and writing become the primary language skills, and a comparatively high level of proficiency in them is required (Larson, 1987).

To assist would-be translators in preparing for a career in translation, the American Translators Association (1987) has outlined some suggestions in its *Profile of a Competent Translator and of an Effective Translator-Training Program*. Recommendations include the following curriculum:

- courses that provide an extensive knowledge of, and ability to reason in, the subject matter of the translation: mathematics, pure sciences, social sciences, history, business administration, and economics;
- courses that provide a sound reading knowledge and grasp of the language or languages from which one will be translating;
- four years of a major language, two years of a minor language, and as many basic language courses as possible, including at least two years of Latin;
- courses that provide the ability to express oneself in lucid and straightforward English: writing courses, including one in newspaper writing and one in technical writing; and
- periodic participation in advanced postgraduate workshops, notably in specialized subject-matter areas.

Where Does the Need for Translation Exist?

In order to understand the languages and cultures of the nations with whom the United States does business, many companies have turned to translators to render advertisements into the language of the client. Translators may be called on to provide companies with information that will enable them to find out what their competitors are doing to improve their products; to facilitate communications with subsidiaries; and to translate company publications, such as employee manuals, safety regulations, and company policy. Information on research or marketing efforts within the company must be provided to foreign subsidiaries in order to promote the technological advancement of the firm as a whole, and countless letters, telegrams, and telefaxes sent from one subsidiary to another must be translated.

Many scientific journals are now written in languages that have not received much attention in the United States, such as Japanese, Russian, Portuguese, and Chinese. Currently, one-fourth to one-half of all scientific scholarly production is in languages not handled by U.S. scientists, and only about 20 percent of the 10,000 technical journals published in Japan are translated into English (Fedunok, 1987). Translators are needed to keep up with the discoveries taking place in research throughout the world.

Scholarly papers to be presented at conferences in foreign countries may need translating, and individuals seeking U.S. citizenship may need to have their birth certificate or other relevant documents translated into English.

Conclusion

The demand for competent translators is at an all-time high. With the internationalization of science and the global market, materials are being produced in many languages, just as American products are being marketed in many countries. Because of the advanced state of science, subject-matter specialization is a must for a translator, as are highly developed writing skills. Whereas a few years ago, the United States could rely on its immigrant population to do much of its translating, in the future it will have to rely more on the educational institutions of this country to prepare students in technical subjects and to provide them with excellent writing skills in English and translation.

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